

Scattershot

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Before the young man claiming to have a bomb in his backpack boarded the bus, Wiktoría had been sitting there peering out of the pollen-flecked windows in a state of preoccupation over her name, and not for the first time. She had just emerged from an unfortunate encounter with a bank teller in an unsuccessful attempt to withdraw cash from her account. Today was farmer's market, and she'd wanted to do some shopping to buy some sour plums and other sundry produce, but the vendors only accepted cash. She'd waited in line at the credit union like everybody else, but they wouldn't allow her to withdraw money—the teller had noticed that her driver's license had expired. It wasn't just that it had expired, it'd expired more than eight years ago, and she hadn't even known.

But that's not what had been the focus of all her inattention when the disturbed young man with the backpack had first entered the bus directly across from her. She'd chosen the wide open seats reserved for the elderly, which she was, though she wouldn't describe herself in

that way. They were the hard, utilitarian kind of bus seats, the type with the peak in the middle and built-in depressions in the generic shape of a rear-end, which Wiktoría had always found superfluous, preposterous even, as if a person's behind wouldn't know what to do if it didn't have a mold upon which to arrange itself. As she sat there with the peak jutting painfully into her coccyx in all the wrong places, Wiktoría had been hung up on the bank teller's reaction to her name as it was typed on her driver's license.

"Oh! They've spelled your name wrong at the DMV," the woman had said. "You should get that taken care of right away or it will cause all sorts of trouble down the line."

The young teller's nametag was pinned horizontally across the breast pocket of her blouse. It was ramrod straight, to the point of being almost an expression of an ideal—you could balance a bean on the top rim. The nametag proclaimed that her name was JENIFER.

Jenifer-with-one-n's blouse appeared crisply ironed and was the faintest shade of lavender that could possibly exist while still being called lavender. You couldn't tell whether it was really that color or if it had originally been white but had been accidentally laundered in hot water together with something that was navy blue, although this Jenifer person seemed more fastidious than that.

Wiktoría had looked down at her driver's license then and confirmed that it was indeed her name as it had been written on her birth certificate. There was no error.

"But you said your name was Victoria. And this begins with a double-u."

Wiktoría nodded yes, that was true, and explained that she was originally from Poland, way back when. This was how her name was spelled there.

"That must have been *awful* for you," the young woman opined. She had a slight gap in her top front teeth and they were set at opposing angles the way you see sometimes with children who've sucked their thumbs over a long period of time, or like the pages of a book when it's cracked open and waiting to be read. It was anticipatory, that gap in the teeth, as if nothing less than the future of humanity itself hung in the hot breath that flowed in and out of it.

Wiktoría didn't quite understand what the young woman had

meant by her comment. Did Jenifer think it was awful that she'd come from Poland or that her name had been spelled in this peculiar way? She looked at the teller with an intentionally quizzical expression and did not respond.

"I mean, living here all these years with people mispronouncing your name every time they read it—in school, at the doctor's office. Did you ever think to change the spelling?"

Wiktoría said she hadn't, that then it wouldn't have been her name, it would have been someone else's idea of what her name should be.

"Well you know that many people's ancestors changed the spellings of their names once they got here because it was too much of a hassle otherwise. Ours was supposedly 'S-m-y-t-h-e' back in the day, but they changed it to 'S-m-i-t-h' because that's how it was supposed to be pronounced: 'Smith.'"

Wiktoría said *ah* and waited for the teller to process her withdrawal slip. But all of the added scrutiny over the driver's license had prompted the teller to eventually notice that it was out of date.

"I'm sorry...Wiktoría,"—she'd paused to read the name directly off the card, forming the *wuh* sound instead of the V despite the fact that she'd heard how it was correctly pronounced only moments before—"but this is way expired. Do you have another form of ID? I can't process this unless you have a valid form of ID. I'd get fired if they found out."

Wiktoría wondered aloud how anyone would find out if Jenifer was the only one who'd seen the ID.

"Oh there's cameras everywhere in here. Who knows who's watching and when?" The young woman nudged back the expired license with only the tips of her fingers as if it were some kind of contraband.

The card slid back to Wiktoría across the fake wood graining of the laminate counter with a steady *swish*, and Wiktoría puzzled over why anyone would go to the trouble of trying to make plastic counters superficially resemble wood. She took no real issue with plastic counters as a category, but she felt that they should at least announce their plasticity plainly and openly. If the bank had wanted a woodsy look, they should have just gone with real wood.

So no farmer's market then, Wiktoría mused as she walked back outside into the balmy afternoon—that was a shame. She sat down at the bus stop beside a man with a beard who was wearing business clothes and ear buds and saw then as she glanced at her feet that she'd been wearing bedroom slippers this whole time. She laughed and the man with the beard looked up, so she pointed down toward her feet by way of explanation for the sudden laughter. The man forced a smile the way one does with a child who's picked a clover flower and held it up for evaluation. He nodded, then returned his attention to his phone.

When the bus approached, both the man with the beard and Wiktoría stood up to indicate for the bus to stop. Presumably the driver perceived Wiktoría's advanced age, as the bus blared out a series of piercing bleeps and blurts while the whole front end lurched down toward the curb so the steps would be lower. Wiktoría missed the time when bus drivers would simply get out of their seats and help a person up the steps if need be, but it seemed to her that things were moving more and more away from direct human contact in general these days. She was surprised there were still bank tellers at all now, or even physical banks for that matter.

Wiktoría climbed the steps, slow and deliberate, so as not to lose a bedroom slipper under the bus, but she couldn't find her bus pass in her pocketbook. The man with the beard volunteered to pay for her fare. She thanked him and sat down in the empty wide open seats reserved for people her age, though there were many vacant seats and perhaps only ten other people on the bus including the driver. The man with the beard retreated to the back as if to be as far away from Wiktoría as he could.

Before reflecting on the exchange with the bank teller over the spelling of her name, she thought of the robot that her daughter had just gotten her for Mother's Day. It was an elderly-assist kind of robot, though she'd already forgotten what precisely it was supposed to do. Perhaps it was for tidying around the house or purely for companionship, she couldn't quite recall. It was only the prototype of a robot, though, not yet available to the masses, but her daughter Susanna knew someone from the design team and had signed up to beta-test the model.

When Wiktoria had protested at the idea of being labeled elderly, her daughter had sighed, “Oh, Mum.” When Wiktoria had suggested that perhaps the only reason one might give their elderly mother a robot might be to assuage one’s guilt at not coming around as often as might be desired, Susanna had said, “*Stop.*”

The robot’s name was Harvey. It had a childlike voice that Wiktoria found to be unsettling and incongruous—both with it being a machine and with its name being Harvey.

Clearly it had been programmed to continuously engage when in the presence of a human, for it wouldn’t stop pestering her about things she didn’t care remotely about. “Do you want to go for a walk?” it would ask. No, she was reading, she would reply. “What are you reading?” it would ping. None of your business, she would respond: you wouldn’t understand. She’d kept it in the house for only the one morning before shooing it into the garage with the proposition that it try to fold some laundry. Every now and again, she’d hear a series of thuds and chirps from the garage, but she didn’t really have much reason to go in there anymore, and so she didn’t.

As the bus rumbled on, she looked up at all that pollen peppered over the windows, glinting yellow-green in the afternoon sun like the product of some colossal sneeze. The pattern reminded her of the coffee table book she had on display in her living room which had been a gift ages ago from a nephew who’d worked for NASA. She usually got rid of coffee table books shortly after receiving them, but this one was a commemoration of the Hubble Space Telescope and it was rather striking. She’d paged through it on a whim before banishing it to the donation bin out in the garage, but she hadn’t been able to get past this page of galaxies. It looked at first glance just like a regular photo of a desert night sky—dazzling gems of light blasted scattershot across a black background. But it wasn’t stars, it was galaxies, and there were millions of them on just that one page, and within each of them, billions of stars again, and perhaps zillions of planets orbiting around them. You couldn’t see them, of course, you had to just try to imagine that they were there, and she did try each and every day. She tried very hard indeed.

She’d kept it open to that same page of galaxies ever since, and it still hadn’t blended into the background of her lived environment for

her. She still considered that page regularly, even now, ten years later. In the absence of any occupation or anyone to care for now, it had given her a reason to live.

Somewhere along the bus route, though, all of her thoughts were interrupted by this angry young man. He came in shouting right off the bat that he had a bomb in his backpack and would blow up the bus and everyone in it if they didn’t do as they were told. Wiktoria looked up at the young man, who seemed barely out of high school, and judged him to be the type of figure she would ordinarily find annoying, were she not in the midst of a nascent hostage situation. Actually, she found him annoying even then.

“All right, everyone pass your phones up here to—” he looked down at her, “What’s your name, lady?”

She told him her name.

“—to Victoria here, so she can keep an eye on them for me, and if any of y’all call 9-1-1, I’ll detonate, you copy?” He held in his hand what looked to be a slim remote control, the kind you might have for an alarm clock radio. Wiktoria’s eyesight was still quite sharp for her age, and she could even see that the remote had the *Samsung* logo imprinted across the top.

The ten or so people on the bus passed up their phones as they were told. A young boy toward the back began to cry beside his mother.

The man with the beard who’d paid Wiktoria’s fare called out from the back of the bus, “Why are you doing this? What do you want from us?”

“What do I *want*? What does any of us want? A little peace, love, and understanding, am I right?” The young man petted at a pelt of peach fuzz shadowing his upper lip. A few stiff red whiskers darted out of a large, oblong mole on his right cheek, about the circumference of a thumbprint. The mole seemed to Wiktoria almost a third eye, observing her from the side whenever he looked away, the whiskers its lashes.

Then the bus driver piped up, “Listen, do you want me to keep driving or pull over or what?”

“Why don’t you pull over under an overpass somewhere? They won’t want to risk the possibility that I might blow the whole freeway

apart.”

Pull | over | under | an | over | pass. The words seemed almost meaningless to her in such a configuration. Wiktoria was beginning to feel dizzy though she was still sitting down. She addressed the young man with the backpack.

“What’s your name, young man?”

“None of your goddamned beeswax.”

The boy toward the back, who was perhaps seven, continued to cry audibly, though his mother tried to shush him into the droopy wings of her oversized sweater.

“I’m just wondering if perhaps you might want to let the child go,” Wiktoria suggested. “He’ll be distracting. Maybe even annoying.”

The young man considered this for a moment. One of the phones in the pile beside Wiktoria beeped as if it had received a text message, and he stared at it the way a cat stares at a hair tie it’s about to pounce on from across the room. He scratched at the back of one hand with the remote control until the hand was both white and pink and raw.

“No way,” he eventually concluded, “kids make the most valuable hostages.”

The mother let out a low moan.

“Hey, driver—call into dispatch to tell him somebody’s got a bomb on the bus and that he’ll blow it up if the police try to rescue anyone. Tell him we’ll call in demands in a minute.”

The driver kept going and relayed the message as requested. The young man—the kid, really—shuffled and hopped around in place with the nervous energy of a small finch crammed into a crowded cage at a pet store. His amber eyes were more vacant than a bird’s, though. They had a blank, piscine quality to them that made it hard for Wiktoria to gauge his state of mind. He was certainly jumpy, anyway.

“What should we order, should we order pizza?” he asked to both no one and everyone on the bus. He was a scrawny figure with the bent-over posture of a crochet hook. He wore elastic-waist track pants that he kept having to hoist up with both hands when they sagged. *Where’s your mother?*—was all Wiktoria could think of the young man.

“Isn’t that what hostage takers always ask for in order to buy more time in the movies—pizza? Nobody ever orders heroin—maybe that’s

what we should get. It would be more original, anyway.”

“Jesus, he’s a junkie,” muttered the man with the beard in the back. The other bus riders darted looks his way but stayed relatively silent.

“What did you say?” called the young man. His face was yellowish-orange in a way that seemed to betray a vitamin deficiency of some kind, or perhaps he’d consumed too much beta-carotene, though that seemed unlikely.

“Do you even have a real bomb? Or is this all just some elaborate dumb ploy to get some drugs? Maybe just rob a 7-11 next time, okay?”

The mother of the little boy turned around and needled the bearded man with a pointed glare. *Shut up!*—she said with her whole body, and especially her eyes, but not her mouth. She kept her mouth shut.

“None of your goddamned beeswax,” the young man repeated. “Wouldn’t you like to know? The thing is, I don’t have to show you because I’m the one with the bomb, meaning I’m in charge here. So why don’t you just shut the fuck up already?”

Wiktoria absorbed the young man’s fleeting profanity as a jolt to her anatomy, a reflexive high voltage prod to the base of her spine that she had never quite been able to shake since she’d come to America whenever somebody swore in her presence. The first time she’d heard that word in English had been back when she was living in a Polish children’s camp after being evacuated to Bombay by way of Tehran during the war. She had heard a British liaison officer say it to one of his mates along with an obscene gesture in reference to some of the older girls at the camp on his way out one day. *I’d fuck every Polly in there if it weren’t for all the bloody lice*—he’d said. His friend had said *Jesus* and laughed. This particular officer had always referred to the girls as Polly—all of them—and thought himself clever for it because they were from Poland. He used to wave to the girls when coming and going and call out, “Hullo, pretty Polly! Don’t you look lovely today.”

Wiktoria looked up at the young man standing over her on the bus and said again in a calm voice, “Why don’t you tell us your name? Maybe we can help you.”

“You don’t sound like you’re from around here. Where are you *from*, lady?” was his response.

“Well. I’m from all over really.” She’d stayed over in India for a number of years after the war, so her English had a South-Asian/British inflection to it, with the added complexity of her Polish brogue. She swallowed her vowels deep in her throat and attacked consonants with gusto in a way that often came across as vaguely Icelandic. “But I’m originally from Poland.”

The young man’s face became pale then, the yellow-orange fading to an almost eggshell color. “Shit, you aren’t from a concentration camp, are you?” Again, she felt his profanity as a violation. He peered over at her forearms conspicuously to see if she had any of the telltale signs.

“No,” she shook her head. “We weren’t fleeing the holocaust, just war and starvation.” Wiktoria found it funny that the young man was upset that he might have been holding a holocaust survivor hostage but wasn’t disturbed by the hostage situation in general.

Then he confessed, “I’m an immigrant too, you know.”

“Oh?” Wiktoria was skeptical, but she didn’t want to provoke him, so she left it there.

“My family’s from Toronto.”

“This is ridiculous!” shouted the man with the beard from the back of the bus. The other riders shifted around in their seats, restless. “This is total bullshit. He does not have a bomb. I can’t believe I’m missing my train for this therapy session.”

“*You*. Are going to get us all *killed*.” This from the mother finally, whose son was now wailing at full volume as if he were awaiting an imminent injection at a doctor’s office or enduring the extraction of a splinter. She’d given up trying to console him by now, or rather, it had become largely automatic and mechanical. She pet him on the shoulder over and over again in the same rhythmic, gently patronizing way, and repeated the words, *Shhh, it’ll be okay*, on loop as if it were a mantra.

Another of the phones beside Wiktoria buzzed in receipt of a message. In general, the buzzing and chiming were occurring with more frequency now with the owners unavailable to respond.

“I’m not trying to *kill* anybody,” the young man with the

backpack insisted. “I’m only...” They all hung raptly to the edges of his words to hear what he was going to say, but he trailed off, brushed his peach fuzz, and muttered something unintelligible instead.

The bus was now parked under the interstate at the edge of the bay, and somehow a swarm of helicopters was already zuzzing overhead.

Wiktoria’s elderly-assist robot—that is, Harvey—had generated a similarly insectoid whir whenever it was up and about. Not loud like a vacuum or faint like a refrigerator, but droning and wasp-like. When it came upon her from behind, she kept feeling as though something were about to sting her, and she’d get the urge to wave about and swat at the air around her body. But when she’d turn to look it was always just the robot, blinking back at her with the protruding, half-domed eyes of a praying mantis.

It was the blinking which had made her shudder most of all. It made her overly conscious of the effort which had gone into trying to make her feel comfortable in its presence. But a robot doesn’t need to blink; perhaps it shouldn’t, then—she’d decided.

As time crept on in the parked bus, it was becoming apparent that the young man had no clear plan or even precise objective for the hostage situation. He clearly lacked the brinkmanship for such an endeavor. The man with the beard eventually pointed out to the other passengers that the backpack seemed light and pillowy, not firm and mechanical as it would have been if it contained bomb components, and the young man had done little to dissuade them of this notion. It was as if the taking of the hostages had been the end in itself all along, a performance of rage that had been sufficiently exorcised, and now that the step had been completed, he didn’t appear to know what to do next. His heart didn’t seem to be in it any longer.

“Do tell us your name, young man.” Wiktoria again tried to engage him on a human level after a long silence. Negotiations were at an impasse between law enforcement and the young man, who’d demanded both heroin and pizza through the bus communications system with ambiguous results. “It helps. We can help you.”

“My name’s...”—he petered out and sighed. “Joe Blow,” he finally said, and smiled weakly.

She didn’t believe him.

"I know what we'll do," he said, perking up. "We'll send *you* out with the backpack as a decoy, and they'll be so caught up with the release of a hostage that I'll be able to slip away out the other side of the underpass. There are cars parked end to end from here almost to the bay, so if you distract them, I might be able to crawl under the cars and escape to the bay undetected."

"That would probably work," Wiktoria said, nodding in encouragement, although she didn't really think that it would.

Just then, the pile of phones beside her all began to beep, buzz, and light up nearly simultaneously. The bus went quiet—even the sobbing child—and everyone stared at the stack of phones. There were so many of them buzzing at once that one was jostled to the floor. And then as soon as it had started, all of the vibrating and bleeping just stopped.

The young man with the backpack looked at Wiktoria. "Do you think it's a news alert maybe?"

"I wouldn't know," she replied, because she didn't.

He snorted. "Maybe we're already famous." He picked one of the phones up at random and touched the home screen. The phone was unlocked. As he gazed at the display, he cocked his head to the side and scrunched his brow the way a dog does when you've done something it didn't expect, like hoot out loud in the style of a monkey. He zoomed in with his pinched fingers and held it up to his face to more closely scrutinize the screen. An unusual amount of time passed before he said anything, and the bus remained hushed until he finally spoke.

"It's about *you*," he eventually said to Wiktoria. He seemed disappointed. He showed her the picture on the screen—it was quite obviously her, though she didn't recognize how old she'd become.

Everyone on the bus looked at Wiktoria then in almost an accusatory way, as if she were somehow complicit in all of this, as if her part in things so far had been only an act. But she was just as taken aback as they were.

"It's an AMBER Alert, or like an elder alert, or something. Looks like you've wandered away from home, Grandma." He laughed, and addressed the room this time. "'Person at risk. May be confused or disoriented.' But get this," he turned back to her, "they spelled your

name wrong. 'Wiktoria,'" he said, air quotes and all. With the *wuh* sound.

She didn't correct him.

"Go figure," he shook his head. He seemed genuinely baffled by the development, but it didn't change his plans.

When it came time for her to exit the bus, it was decided that she should carry the backpack in front, "like you're pregnant," said the young man / Joe Blow, "so they'll see it right away and freak the fuck out."

This time, the word passed through her without catching on anything substantial. No high voltage jolts or waves of revulsion. Her mind was drifting in some other realm entirely, and she'd barely heard him at all.

When it came time for her to leave the bus, she didn't see what became of the young man. She didn't see him slither under a series of cars in an army crawl down the road. She didn't see him slip out inadvertently into the path of a state trooper who was hiding in the bushes, who jumped out and yelled at him to freeze. She didn't see that the young man ignored him, didn't stop but instead charged right at the trooper, or that the state trooper fired several rounds into the chest of the young man until he was neither young nor a man anymore.

Instead, Wiktoria walked out the other side of the underpass as they'd agreed, out of the slack-jawed shade of late afternoon and into the sharp arrows of evening sun. She came out and saw before her a little remote controlled vehicle wheeling in her direction, a tiny tank with telescoping arms. A robot, as it were. She heard someone on a megaphone somewhere telling her to put down the backpack as gently as she could and then walk to safety. The backpack was light and squishy, just as the man in the beard had suspected after all, perhaps only containing a bundle of socks or a sweatshirt. If there really was a bomb, it would have to be puny, no bigger than a calculator.

The robot inched closer and cheerfully aimed both its little camera and grabby paw right at Wiktoria. It was then that she remembered the precise reason that her daughter Susanna had brought over Harvey to begin with. He—it—was supposed to make sure she didn't wander off and get lost somewhere. Harvey the robot was there to

keep an eye on her and notify the police if she left the house and didn't come back in a timely fashion. Or something like that, anyway. It was supposed to watch over her, like a guard. But she'd wooed it into the garage under the guise of having it do chores because she didn't like the way it had looked at her when she'd tried to go out into the garden that morning—could it have been only this morning?—to see the swallowtails alight on the butterfly bush. She'd planted it just last year and it was already nearly as tall as the house—wasn't that something?

She'd encountered many kinds of gatekeepers in her lifetime, and they were virtually all the same. She didn't think it right that any one of them should try to keep her from the joy and beauty and light in the world. The butterfly bush that morning had been just the shade of purple that can crush a person who isn't prepared for it. It was a shocking yet also velvet color—altogether supernatural. A kind of purple she'd only seen once before at an aquarium in a black-lit tank of cnidarians. You could push a sort of arcade-style button on the wall there and it would turn on the black light, and all the little jellies would blast this radiant, luxurious purple, and then when you released the button they would go back to being nearly invisible, just like that. And how fantastic was it that there were these beings with no brains or even central nervous systems, that you could *see* through—and there was nothing perceptible *there*—and yet nevertheless they still clearly possessed some kind of will of their own?

Wiktoría looked down at the scrawny tank advancing before her and declared, "You aren't much, are you." She gladly relinquished the backpack to the robot and turned to go, still wearing her bedroom slippers from the morning. She was going to need a new pair after today.

Wiktoría hoped to return home in time to watch the evening butterflies glut on their last feast of nectar for the night. She just wanted to get back to her garden. Wasn't that a Joni Mitchell song—"Back to the Garden"—or something like that? Maybe not the name of it but that was the gist anyway. Wiktoría had always liked that song, the way her voice rose up at the end in some great cosmic ululation toward the star clusters, or to whomever might be listening out in a nebula somewhere. *We are stardust, we are golden*. Who knows what any

of it was supposed to mean? But wasn't it marvelous to have to wonder.

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